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HISTORY

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WORLD

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# A History of Byzantium

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6

## *The Age of Justinian*

250	500	750	1000	1250	1500
527	Justinian emperor				
532	Nika Revolt				
533–534	Conquest of North Africa				
535–552	Conquest of Italy				

The reign of Justinian is commonly regarded as the Golden Age of the early Byzantine period. The emperor and his consort Theodora are two of the best-known Byzantine personalities, and during this time the uncertainty of earlier years was replaced by confidence and a new synthesis of ancient and Christian society. Justinian's reign will always be associated with the reconquest of the West that nearly brought about the restoration of the old Roman Empire, and he will always be connected with the construction of the church of Hagia Sophia, one of the pre-eminent symbols of the Byzantine Empire as a whole. Art and literature flourished under his rule, and his officials carried out a remarkably thorough synthesis of Roman law that has served as the basis of the legal systems of much of Europe up to the present day. He was one of the few Byzantine emperors whose ideas about his power were matched by a considerable degree of reality. The personalities of the emperor – and even more, the empress – have been the subject of much discussion, and even the focus of popular novels and films, in large part because of the graphic descriptions provided by the contemporary historian Prokopios. Nevertheless, despite the obvious glories of the age, historians are aware of the crisis that followed almost immediately after the emperor's death, and we may ask to what extent the difficulties of the late sixth and seventh centuries were the result of misgovernment under Justinian. In addition, there can be no doubt that Justinian

was an autocrat: he himself would have admitted as much, in large part because he seems to have accepted fully the ideas put forth 200 years earlier by Eusebios of Caesarea: the Byzantine emperor was the representative of God, to whom he alone was answerable, and just as the Kingdom of God was an unquestionable monarchy, so the Byzantine Empire was to be ruled by an emperor with autocratic power. Some contemporaries criticized this aspect of Justinian's character and policy, and many modern historians do the same today.

## **Background: The Reign of Justin I**

The emperor Anastasios had no children, so upon his death in 518 the position was up for the taking. There was turmoil at the court, but power was soon seized by the aged commander of the *exkoubitores* (the palace guard), Justin. Like many of his predecessors, Justin had risen from a humble background in the Latin-speaking areas of the Balkans. He had come to Constantinople in search of his fortune, enrolled in the army, and risen through the ranks, ultimately serving as a commander in the wars of Anastasios I. Justin used his position with the *exkoubitores* and, apparently, his own cleverness and guile, to secure the throne and immediately set out to establish a policy very different from that of his predecessor. For example, he exiled some of Anastasios' supporters and recalled other individuals who had fallen out of favor. Later tradition asserts that Justin's nephew Justinian was the force behind his uncle's throne right from the beginning, and there may be some truth in that, since Justinian was selected to hold the consulship as early as 521.

Overall, Justin's policy was based on a determination to seek peace with the West, meaning the papacy and the remnant of the Roman aristocracy in Italy. The emperors' recent religious policy had rendered these relations difficult and, immediately after Justin's accession, a local church council was held in Constantinople, which asserted a Chalcedonian position and condemned a series of prominent Monophysite bishops; this was followed by a series of similar councils throughout the East. The condemnation of Monophysite bishops was enforced by the emperor, and many went into exile, especially to Egypt, including Severus of Antioch, who became the leading spokesperson for moderate Monophysitism. By the end of 518 the eastern court sent letters to the pope, seeking an end to the Akakian Schism, which had caused years of disagreement. Difficult negotiations followed, but the schism had effectively been healed and the court of Constantinople was firmly Chalcedonian in



sentiment.

Ironically enough, agreement between the emperor and the pope led to worsening relations with the Ostrogothic king Theodoric in Ravenna. As long as the pope and the emperor were opposed to each other Theodoric could feel safe in trusting his orthodox subjects, but now that the two were again on good terms, Theodoric felt threatened. The situation was worsened when Justin decided to push more actively for the elimination of heresy in the East, involving, of course, Monophysitism but also Arianism, the version of Christianity endorsed by Theodoric. Attempts were made to heal relations between Constantinople and Ravenna, and Justin even agreed to share the consulship with Theodoric's son-in-law and presumed heir Eutharic, the first Goth to hold this high office. Meanwhile, Theodoric became more and more distrustful of his Roman subjects, and the result was, among other things, the execution of Boethius in 524. In 526 Theodoric himself died, leaving the boy Athalaric as his heir.

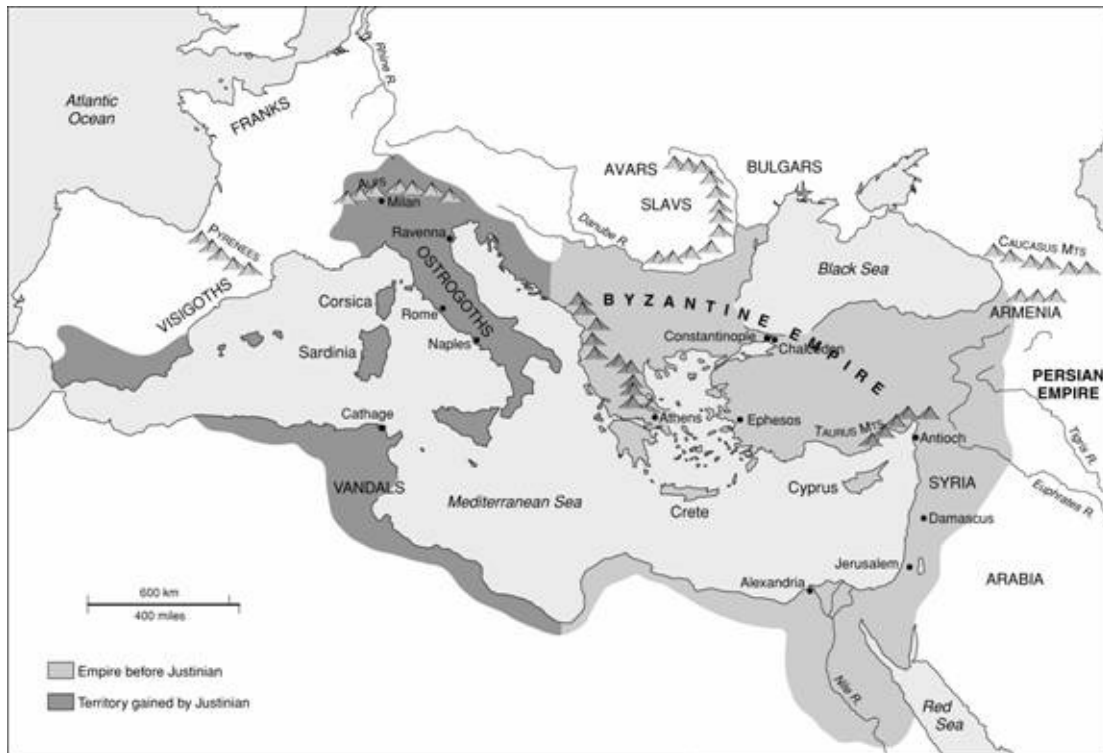
Justin generally maintained a friendly relationship with Persia, although he expanded Byzantine influence by building a series of alliances with Persia's neighbors, including the Lazi and the Iberians, and there was an inconsequential war with Persia right at the end of Justin's reign. According to Prokopios, who hated all things connected with Justinian, Justin was boorish and uneducated, not even able to sign his name, but relying on a stencil held by his officials in order to ratify imperial papers. There can be no doubt, however, that his reign marked an important change of direction in imperial policy, and this was to find full development under his nephew Justinian.

## **Justinian and Theodora: Early Years to 532**

Justinian's real name was Flavius Petrus Sabbatius, but the name on his consular diptych of 521 is Flavius Petrus Sabbatius Justinianus, showing that, before that time, he had been adopted by his uncle Justin, who had brought him to Constantinople some years earlier. Justinian, as he was known to contemporaries, was thus raised in the atmosphere of the capital and, although he held high rank in the army, he had obviously received a good education and was equally at home in Greek and in Latin. He was born about 482, and as a young man he already displayed some of the restlessness or even foolhardiness that was to characterize his later life, becoming involved in the violence of the circus factions that was common at the time.

These factions had developed from the associations or companies that supplied horses and trappings for the chariot races in Hellenistic Alexandria and then in imperial Rome. Each of the companies distinguished their entries with individual colors: red, blue, green, white, etc. The circus races (i.e., races in the hippodrome) were enormously popular in Rome, and later in Constantinople and the other cities of the early Byzantine East, and they attracted huge numbers of fans who came to identify themselves with the colors of their favorite charioteers. Thus, by the fifth or sixth centuries the “factions” had come to mean, not so much the companies responsible for providing the horses, but the fans themselves, who were commonly made up largely of young men who were fanatically loyal to their “color.” Just as in modern football games, the fans often engaged in organized chants or shouts, they commonly wore outlandish and immediately identifying clothes and haircuts, and they sometimes engaged in violence, especially against members of opposing factions. This violence not uncommonly spilled outside the hippodrome into the streets, and it had, by the late fifth and early sixth century, become endemic in Constantinople and, to a lesser degree, elsewhere. By this time, the other factions had all but disappeared, leaving only the Greens and the Blues to fight with each other. At one time scholars thought that the factions must have represented ideological or social differences within the early Byzantine cities, since only thus – it was thought – could we explain the violence and the strong attachment people had to the factions. For example, it was once argued either that the Blues represented the interests of the aristocracy while the Greens supported the commercial class, or that the Blues supported a western policy while the Greens had an eastern orientation, and/or that the Blues were Orthodox and the Greens Monophysite. There is, however, little or no evidence for any such identifications, and it seems likely that the factions were simply made up of young men who identified with their own faction for no reason other than group solidarity, and that they engaged in violence in the same way as modern football hooligans. Even the emperors often took sides in factional partisanship and there is reason to believe that Justinian, before he became emperor, was already known as a supporter of the Blues.

**Map 6.1** The Byzantine Empire in the time of Justinian (after Jackson J. Spielvogel, *Western Civilization*, 5th edn (Belmont, CA, 2003), map 7.4, p. 181)



Probably early in the 520s Justinian married Theodora, another example of the future emperor's headstrong thinking and willingness to go against tradition. It is true that many of the emperors (and empresses) of the past three centuries had come from humble beginnings, not least the family of Justinian himself, but Theodora would have seemed a most unusual choice for the emperor's nephew, who must already have been seen as a candidate for the imperial throne. Theodora was by all accounts beautiful – and the surviving representations of her (e.g., the San Vitale mosaic in Ravenna) bear this out – and she certainly was intelligent and ingenious, but she was an actress, a profession that in this period was synonymous with prostitution. The *Secret History* of Prokopios tells the story of Theodora's early years in lurid detail. The future empress was the daughter of a “bear-keeper” of the Green faction, a trainer of the wild beasts used in hippodrome performances, and her mother was a dancer and an actress. When her father died and her mother remarried, the family asked the Green faction to appoint the new husband as bear-keeper, but the faction refused; the mother and daughter presented their petition again publicly to the faction in the hippodrome, but the result was the same – until the Blue faction was persuaded to take the stepfather on as their new bear-keeper. Theodora herself became an actress as soon as she was old enough, and, according to Prokopios, she was known for her especially pornographic performances on the stage.

**Figure 6.1** The Empress Theodora, San Vitale, Ravenna. This famous mosaic portrait of the empress depicts her with a halo and wearing an elaborate crown and pearl- and jewelry-studded garments; she is presenting a richly decorated chalice to Christ. Photo: Scala/Art Resource, NY.



Justinian's aunt, the empress Euphemia, objected to the marriage of Justinian and Theodora, even though, ironically enough, she herself had risen from the theater to the imperial palace. In addition, there was a law that forbade a marriage between an actress and a senator (which Justinian was). Nonetheless, after Euphemia's death, Justin promulgated a law that allowed marriage between a "repentant" actress and a senator, and the couple were wed.

Justin crowned Justinian as co-emperor at the beginning of April in 527, and Justinian's succession was smooth after the old emperor's death on August 1 of that year. Justinian took his role as an absolute Christian emperor very seriously, and his early years were marked by the authoritarianism and self-confidence that were to characterize nearly the whole of his reign. He surrounded himself with political newcomers, people like himself, who were strong-willed, ambitious, and willing to break with tradition wherever they thought best. This ruling imperial clique had no patience with the established nobility of Constantinople who, although they too could hardly trace their ancestry back very far, regarded the emperor and his supporters as crude and ambitious upstarts. The imperial

clique included the empress Theodora, her friend Antonia, the wife of Belisarios, Justinian's greatest general, Justinian's nephew Germanos, the tax-collector John of Kappadokia, the eunuch general Narses, and the jurist Tribonian. This clique was indeed a formidable group and it was responsible for much of the efflorescence of Justinian's reign.

Some of Justinian's first actions were in the religious sphere, against Manichaeans, Samaritans, and pagans. Renewed laws against pagan sacrifice and prohibition of pagans in the imperial service show that the empire was not entirely Christian by this time, and the conversion of thousands of pagans by John of Ephesos in the 540s testifies to this as well. In 529 Justinian forbade pagans to teach in schools, and this may have led to the closure of the Academy in Athens, one of the foremost intellectual institutions of the period; the professors of the Academy supposedly took flight to the court of the Persian king, who was quite willing to support their activities. The teachers, however, were apparently not happy in Persia, and some of them seem to have returned to Byzantine territory; a clause of the "eternal" peace signed by Justinian and the Persian king Chosroes (Khusro) I in 532 allowed for these teachers to practice their religion in peace within the empire.

Justinian also took action against the Samaritans. They were a strictly monotheistic group who rejected all the books of the Hebrew Bible after the Pentateuch (the first five) and were therefore not accepted by the Jews. Roman tradition, however, viewed them as Jews and left them alone in their settlements in central Israel and elsewhere (including members in Constantinople) even though they had revolted against Byzantine rule at least twice in the fifth century. Justinian attacked them, limiting their right to bequeath property and ordering their synagogues to be destroyed; the result was another revolt in 529. Justinian ruthlessly put down the revolt and destroyed their altar on Mount Gerizim, although the Samaritans were able to revolt again later in the century.

Justinian did not immediately attack heresy, in part because, although he was a Chalcedonian, Theodora strongly supported Monophysitism. The historian Prokopios claimed that the imperial couple feigned this disagreement, in order better to control the religious situation from both sides, but there is no reason to think that this was not based upon sincere belief on the part of both the emperor and the empress. As a result, although Justinian became personally involved in the question of Monophysitism, as we shall see below, he did not persecute the Monophysites and, indeed, he made a deathbed promise to his wife in 548 not to do so – a promise he apparently kept.



Immediately upon his accession Justinian sought to reform the bureaucracy of the state, not so much by reforming its structure (as, for example, Diocletian and Constantine had done), but by making the bureaucracy work more efficiently, especially by rooting out corruption and improving the system of tax collection. Certainly, some of the criticisms of the emperor were the result of his unceasing attempts to close loopholes and eliminate the corruption that had benefited so many individuals, including members of the senatorial order. His greatest accomplice in this task was John the Kappadokian, a ruthless and high-handed praetorian prefect whom Justinian had met well before he became emperor. John was clever and tireless in his rooting out of tax evaders and finding fiscal savings wherever he could, and his critics – not surprisingly – regarded him with hatred and accused him of every possible vice. There can be no doubt that he was rapacious, but it is clear that John met the emperor's needs in an admirable way.

Another aspect of Justinian's attempt to refashion the Byzantine state was in the area of law. As mentioned above, Roman law was prescriptive in the sense that it had come to be made up of a series of imperial responses to individual problems and requests for the intervention of the emperor. This naturally led to confusion and serious questions about what the law really meant in certain cases. The Theodosian Code of 438 had gone some distance to solving these problems, but many difficulties remained and – by the time of Justinian – there was considerable legislation that had been issued since the time of Theodosios II. Justinian therefore set out to reform and standardize Roman law, and in 528 he appointed a committee, whose first responsibility was the codification of existing law, along the lines of the Theodosian Code. The head of the committee was the distinguished jurist Tribonian, and in just over a year (529) it published the first volume of the *Codex Justinianus*. This text, like the *Codex Theodosianus*, arranged the whole of previous law (back to the time of Hadrian) in categories according to subject, but it was soon itself in need of modification in part because of the considerable legislative activity of the emperor himself.

## **The Nika Revolt**

Before the code could be revised, however, the ambitious reign of Justinian nearly came to an inglorious and sudden end, in the Nika Revolt of January 532. The revolt is named after the Greek word *nika!* (conquer!), the cheer of spectators at the races in the hippodrome that became the battle cry of the rioters in 532. The events of the revolt are all but certain, recorded in detail by the

historians Prokopios and Malalas. Difficulties began on January 10, 532, when the prefect of the city arrested some members of the factions for violence and arranged to have them hanged. Fortunately for the condemned, the execution was botched, and two of them survived, one a member of the Blues and the other of the Greens, and they were taken off to temporary safety in a nearby monastery. Three days later, when the races were held again, the factions asked the emperor for clemency on behalf of the condemned, and when he failed to respond, the Blues and Greens unexpectedly united and raised the cry of revolt. The rioting spread outside the hippodrome; the *praetorium* (essentially the police headquarters and central jail) was set alight and prisoners released; the authorities lost complete control of the situation and many of the great buildings of the city went up in smoke, among them the churches of Hagia Sophia and Hagia Eirene, the Baths of Zeuxippos, and the Chalke, the great central gate of the palace itself. At this point, if not before, members of the aristocracy joined the side of the rioters and sought to turn the trouble into a revolt against the emperor himself. Justinian realized the gravity of the situation and agreed to the removal of some of the prominent officials who were being blamed for imperial policy: John the Kappadokian, Tribonian, and the prefect of the city. The riot, however, continued and Justinian ordered his troops, under the command of Belisarios, to attack the rioters, but the soldiers were unsuccessful in their attempt. On January 18 Justinian appeared in the hippodrome and sought to find a compromise, but his offers were rejected, and instead the rioters proposed the nomination of Hypatios as emperor. Hypatios was a nephew of Anastasios, who had a mediocre career as a military officer under Justin and Justinian, but his proposed elevation brought a degree of legitimacy to the movement and clearly transformed the revolt into an attempt to overthrow the emperor. This aspect of the Nika Revolt could hardly have been engineered without the leadership of interested members of the aristocracy. The situation looked desperate, and Justinian was apparently ready to flee, but he was persuaded to hold firm by the encouragement of Theodora; according to a popular account, she told the emperor that he could take flight if he wished, but she would remain since she “found royalty to be an appropriate burial shroud.” Cowed by his wife’s strength, Justinian again sent Belisarios against the crowd, now assembled in the hippodrome. This time the rioters were no match for the imperial troops and a great slaughter ensued: the sources differ as to the death toll, citing numbers between 30,000 and 35,000. Not surprisingly, the revolt immediately collapsed. Imperial agents quickly captured Hypatios and some other leaders, and they

were immediately executed; arrests continued for some time, incidentally giving the emperor an opportunity to confiscate many estates. The races in the hippodrome, not surprisingly, were suspended and not resumed until about five years later.

On one level the Nika Revolt was typical of the circus riots that had become all too common in the second half of the fifth century. On another level, the riot was a reaction to the authoritarian policies of the emperor, including his attempts to collect taxes and close tax loopholes, as well as his willingness to deal sternly with the violent activities of faction members. In the past half-century it had become common for emperors to favor one of the circus factions over the others, and this produced a kind of stand-off and kept the factions from uniting against the reigning emperor. Justinian and Theodora, however, were willing to oppose the traditional license of the people at the hippodrome, and this ran the danger of the factions uniting against the throne. Finally, it is very clear that members of the aristocracy quickly became involved in the Nika Revolt, even if they were not part of it from the outset. The fiscal policies and the ways in which the peasants and prostitutes controlled the empire were hardly things that would have affected the ordinary people of Constantinople, but they all served to upset the members of the by now traditional aristocracy, who were jealous of their position and conscious of the superiority they felt to the people who were now in charge of the state.

Over the first five years of their reign Justinian and Theodora had built a government based on an open autocracy run essentially by outsiders. This had been seriously challenged in the Nika Revolt, but the emperor's victory was ultimately complete and there was no further challenge to his policy, leaving him essentially free to arrange things as he saw fit.

## **Aftermath: The Building Program**

Once securely back in power, Justinian immediately began to implement a long-envisioned plan to fashion the appearance of Constantinople as he wished. The destruction caused by the rioters provided both the necessity and the opportunity to rebuild many of the great structures of the city. We are well informed about the details of this program since the historian Prokopios wrote a work, *On the Buildings*, which praised the emperor effusively for his activity in Constantinople and throughout the empire. Justinian (or perhaps even Theodora herself) had begun the building program before 532, with construction of the

important church of Sts. Sergios and Bakchos, either as a palatine chapel or as a refuge for Monophysites in the capital. In the end Justinian built or rebuilt a total of more than 30 churches in the city. The first of the reconstructions was the church of Hagia Sophia, the “Great Church” and cathedral of Constantinople. That Justinian already had this in mind is shown by the fact that construction began only 45 days after the end of the riot. This majestic building, one of the crowning achievements of Byzantine architecture, still survives and has come to symbolize Byzantine civilization for many people.

Justinian’s church of Hagia Sophia (variously written as Agia Sofia, Aya Sofia, etc.) is the third church of that name constructed on the same spot. It was dedicated, not to a St. Sofia, but rather to the “Wisdom” (Sophia) of Christ. The plan of the building was entrusted to Anthemios of Tralles and Isidore of Miletos, who were not architects but two of the leading scientists of the day, and they came up with a brilliant and daring scheme. The plan of the building combines the longitudinal plan of the basilica with the domed interior space of a centrally planned structure. The floor plan is nearly square, 78 by 72 meters, with huge colonnaded arcades on the north and south sides.

Above the central space is a dome, 100 Byzantine feet (31 meters) in diameter and 62 meters above the floor. On the east and the west are semi-domes and the exterior walls are pierced with windows (now much reduced in size from the originals). The effect on the visitor, even today, when the building has lost much of its interior decoration, is awe-inspiring, and one can only imagine how it would have appeared, filled with worshipers, thousands of oil lamps, music, the smell of incense, and the color of brightly clad officiants.

### **Box 6.1 *Anthemios of Tralles and Isidore of Miletos***

It is interesting and characteristic of Justinian that he selected theoretical scientists, rather than architects, to design the church of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople. Later tradition, and even the contemporary historian Prokopios, attribute the building’s daring plan and huge domed interior to Justinian and his close connection with God, but it is likely that the design was produced by Anthemios of Tralles and Isidore of Miletos.

Anthemios of Tralles was born into an intellectual family sometime in the late fifth century. He was interested in machines and he wrote books such as *Concerning Remarkable Mechanical Devices* and *On Burning Mirrors*. He was also interested in steam power and actually created artificial earthquakes with this means; he also made artificial thunder and constructed a powerful reflecting mirror. According to Agathias (*Histories* 5.6.3), Anthemios was among the scientists “who apply geometrical speculation to material objects and make models or imitations of the

natural world.”

Isidore of Miletos worked largely on the books of earlier scientists, issuing a revised edition of the works of Archimedes and writing a commentary on an ancient work on vaulting; he did have some practical interests, however, for he constructed a tool by which he could construct parabolas. Justinian made use of Anthemios and Isidore not only in the construction of Hagia Sophia, but he also consulted them about problems of flooding at the fortified city of Dara, on the upper reaches of the Euphrates.

No buildings other than Hagia Sophia have been certainly attributed to these two scientists. Interestingly enough, the original, relatively flat dome of Hagia Sophia collapsed in 558: its construction apparently surpassed the ability of the materials to support its weight. The dome was repaired and raised some 7 meters and the building was rededicated in 562.

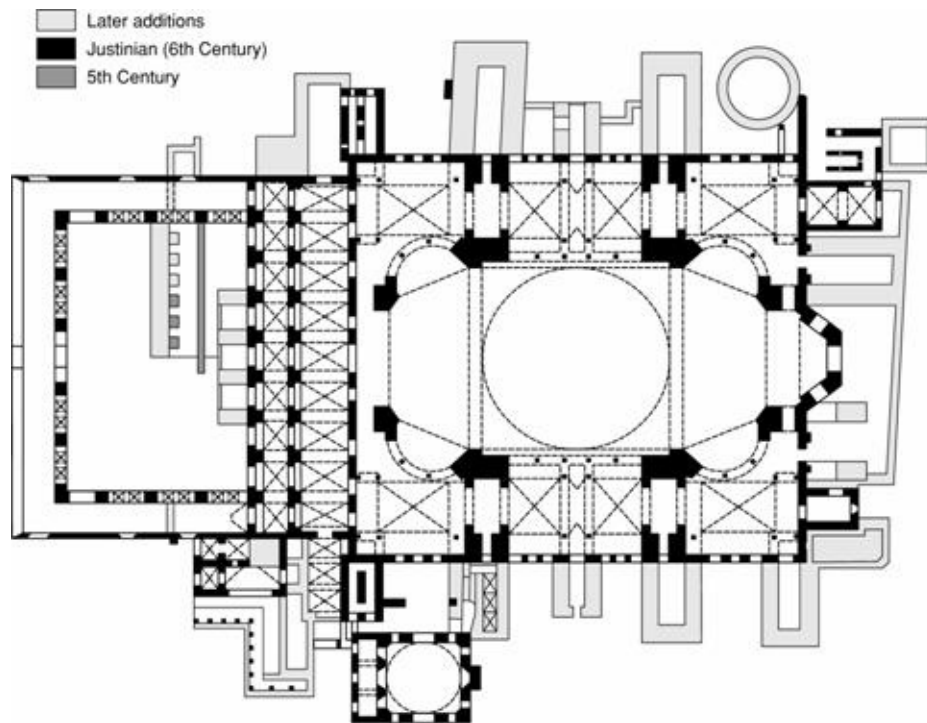
Two comical sculptures in the church of the Panagia (Virgin) Ekatontapylani on the island of Paros have been connected with the story of Anthemios and Isidore. The sculptures show two overweight individuals supporting the columns of a modern entrance to the church. Two stories are told about these individuals, both connected with the rebuilding of the church on Paros in the sixth century; one says that they are indeed Anthemios and Isidore themselves, one holding his hand over his head to protect himself from the falling dome; the other laughing as the dome collapses. The other legend says that the two figures represent the (unknown) builder of the dome of the church and his (also unknown) teacher; in this story the teacher was jealous of the perfection of the dome and sought to kill his pupil, but the pupil grabbed hold of the master and the two of them fell to their death together. Interestingly, but not necessarily connected with the builders, is another story told about this church in Paros: that it was built with 100 entrances (hence its name Ekatontapylani, which means the church “with a hundred gates”). But today only 99 are visible; when someone finds the hundredth doorway... the world will come to an end!

### ***FURTHER READING***

G. L. Huxley, *Anthemius of Tralles*. Cambridge, MA, 1959.

**Figure 6.2** Hagia Sophia, plan. The plan of Hagia Sophia tells us a great deal about the building. At floor level the core was a large rectangle,  $78 \times 72$  meters, with side aisles along the north and south, separated from the central aisle by an enormous colonnade. Thus, in some sense it was a basilica. Four massive piers supported a central dome, 100 Byzantine feet (31 meters) in diameter, and two half-domes on the east and west.





As Prokopios wrote:

So the church has become a spectacle of marvellous beauty, overwhelming to those who see it, but to those who know it by hearsay altogether incredible. First it soars to a height to match the sky, and as if surging up from amongst the other buildings it stands on high and looks down upon the remainder of the city... [The church] is distinguished by indescribable beauty, excelling both in its size, and in the harmony of its measures, having no part excessive and none deficient; being more magnificent than ordinary buildings, and much more elegant than those which are not of so just a proportion. The church is singularly full of light and sunshine; you would declare that the place is not lighted by the sun from without, but that the rays are produced within itself, such an abundance of light is poured into this church.

Justinian rebuilt the church of Hagia Eirene, in a style similar to that of Hagia Sofia, and the church of the Virgin of Pege, just outside the city walls of Constantinople, at the site of a miraculous spring; this church and the miracles associated with it were the source of the legends of the Virgin as the Zoodochos Pege (Life-Giving Spring) and the many ikons depicting her as the source of life. Justinian also reconstructed parts of the palace and other public buildings damaged in the Nika Revolt, and he placed an equestrian statue of himself in the Augustaion, the notional center of the empire.

**Figure 6.3** Hagia Sophia, interior. This view of the interior of Hagia Sophia, looking east toward the apse where the altar was, captures something of the immense inner space of the building. The original dome collapsed in 558 and was rebuilt and rededicated in 562. Earthquakes and the wear of time caused other problems and these were each repaired with the resources available at the time, but the result is that the building today is considerably different from when it was first built; one aspect of this is that the original windows were much larger, letting in even more light and opening up the interior even more than they do now. The Arabic inscriptions, the furniture, and the external minarets (not visible here) were added after the building was converted to a mosque in 1453. It is now a museum. Photo © Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, Image Collections & Fieldwork Archives, Washington DC.



Justinian also carried out a massive building campaign throughout the empire, although it is difficult to know to what extent he was more active than other emperors of this period, and it seems likely that Prokopios, in his wish to praise the emperor, attributed to Justinian the construction of buildings that were the work of his predecessors. Nonetheless, Justinian certainly did build churches and fortifications in many areas. The fortifications were especially important since they were meant to protect areas that were increasingly vulnerable to barbarian

attack, and they included not only massive fortifications around urban areas, but also defenses around villages and refuges for people living in sparsely settled parts of the empire. There is reason to believe that the army in this period suffered from a significant diminution in numbers, for one reason or another, and the armies that Justinian dispatched in his various campaigns were much smaller than those available to rulers of the fourth and fifth centuries. For this reason, apparently, Justinian's military engineers constructed powerful fortifications in many places, probably hoping that the defenses would serve to protect people in the absence of large bodies of troops. This defensive policy was, of course, in marked contrast to the emperor's campaigns of reconquest in the West.

### **Box 6.2 *Anicia Juliana***

When Justinian began his building program in Constantinople he certainly had in mind the activity of Anicia Juliana, and he and all his contemporaries must have judged his work against hers. Juliana was a member of one of the old aristocratic families of Rome. Unlike many of their western colleagues, they had accepted Christianity and they formed close relations with some of the barbarian elites of the period. Juliana's father, Olybrius, married Placidia, the youngest daughter of the western emperor Valentinian III and, in 472, he was chosen as emperor of the West. Olybrius died several months later of natural causes and at an early age Juliana became the heir to a great fortune. She married the Alan Areobindus, who had a distinguished military career under Anastasios I and whom some supporters saw as the leader of a potential revolt against the emperor. When Anastasios I died there was a movement to make Juliana's son Flavius Anicius emperor, but he was passed over in favor of Justin I, the uncle of the future emperor Justinian.

Juliana was pious and dedicated to some of the monastic leaders of her day. She was a determined opponent of the Monophysitism of Anastasios and she corresponded with the pope on this matter. She used her wealth for good works and the construction of many churches in the capital, including that of St. Euphemia and one dedicated to the Virgin. Her greatest achievement was the church of St. Polyeuktos in the capital, built between 524 and 527, a lavish building famed in its day and probably the largest church in Constantinople until Justinian's Hagia Sophia. In later years Anicia Juliana's church was completely destroyed and its exact location unknown until it was excavated in the latter years of the twentieth century. Its remains were identified on the basis of fragments of a poem praising the aristocratic woman for the beauty of the church and comparing her to Solomon (see pp. 144–5).

**Figure 6.4** Bust of an aristocratic woman, probably Anicia Juliana. This woman is depicted as an intellectual, holding a scroll. We cannot be certain if this really is Anicia Juliana, but this is certainly how we would imagine her being portrayed. Photo: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Cloisters Collection, 1966 (66.25). Image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art.



**Figure 6.5** Anicia Juliana, illustration from the Vienna Dioscorides. This text is a medical manuscript made at Juliana's request ca. 512. The hundreds of detailed illustrations of plants in it were copied over and over again during the following centuries. In the image she is pictured between the personifications of Magnanimity (*Megaopsychia*) and Prudence (*Sophrosyne*). Vienna, National Bibliothek, Cod. Vind. Med. gr. 1. Photo: Bildarchiv d. ÖNB, Wien.



She alone has conquered time and surpassed the wisdom of renowned Solomon, raising a temple to receive God, the richly wrought and graceful splendor of which the ages cannot celebrate. How it rises from deep-rooted foundation, springing up from below and pursuing the stars of heaven, and how too it is extended from east to west, glittering beyond description with the brightness of the sun on both sides! On either side of its aisle columns standing on firm columns support the rays of the golden dome, while on each side arched recesses scattered on the dome reproduce the ever-revolving light of the moon. The opposite walls in innumerable paths are clothed in marvelous metallic veins of color, like flowery meadows which Nature made to flower in the depth of the rock, and hid their glory, keeping them for the House of God, to be the gift of Juliana, so that she might produce a divine work, following in her toil the stainless dictates of her heart.

(*Palatine Anthology* 1.10, in *Greek Anthology*, trans. W. R. Paton, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA, 1916), vol. 1, pp. 9–11)

According to another story, Justinian asked Juliana to make appropriate donations to his war



chests, and she took him to the newly built church, gestured at the gold-plated ceilings, and told him to take what he liked – an indication that she understood that the church was one way for an aristocratic family to protect its wealth from a rapacious ruler.

Anicia Juliana was a member of the wealthy class of the empire who disliked the upstarts of Justinian's reign, but it is clear that the emperor and his followers learned well how to imitate the activity and the taste of these wealthy aristocrats.

### ***FURTHER READING***

R. M. Harrison, *A Temple for Byzantium*. London and Austin, TX, 1989.

## **The Imperium Restored: Wars of Reconquest in the West**

The majority of the West had been lost to barbarian chieftains during the fifth century. This had not happened all at once, and conditions in various parts of the West were very different. In North Africa the Vandals had been in power since 429 and they controlled most of central northern Africa from their capital at Carthage, including most of the islands of the western Mediterranean. The Vandal fleet was able to defeat attempts at reconquest and it threatened the coasts of Italy and even Greece. Despite the foundation of a relatively centralized monarchy under Geiseric and the formation of an elite corps of Germanic warriors, life continued relatively unchanged in Vandal Africa. Relations between the Arian conquerors and the “Roman” population were often strained on religious and political levels and there were many confiscations of large properties. Nonetheless, Africa continued to supply grain to Italy, and African-manufactured products (such as pottery) found a market throughout the empire. Italy in this period was controlled, theoretically at least, by the Ostrogoths, who were also Arians. Theodoric, who died only the year before Justinian's accession, had left his kingdom with a good administration based largely on Roman models, and relationships between the Orthodox Italian nobility and the Ostrogothic leaders were generally positive. The pope, of course, played a large role in the politics as well as the religion of Italy and (especially after the end of the Akakian Schism in 519) he generally looked to the emperor in Constantinople as an ally against the Arian rulers in Ravenna. The political situation in the rest of the West was far more fluid, although kingdoms had been set up by the Visigoths in the area around Toulouse (and later Spain) and by the Franks in northern Gaul. Indeed, the conversion of Clovis

(481/2–511) to orthodox Christianity allowed Byzantium – as well as the papacy – to regard the Franks as potential allies against the Arian Germanic states to the south.

As a further mark of Justinian's confidence and ability to manage very different affairs at the same time, he opened hostilities against the Vandals in 533, only a year after the Nika Revolt. The pretense for the expedition was a call from the deposed Vandal king Hilderic (reigned 523–30); during his reign Hilderic had promoted good relations with the Orthodox and had recalled many exiled bishops, but he was overthrown by his cousin Gelimer. Using Hilderic's appeal for aid, and remembering the way in which the Vandals had been a problem for his predecessors, Justinian quickly arranged for war. The expedition of about 10,000 men was under the command of Belisarios.

The victory, it turned out, was surprisingly easy for the Byzantines. Gelimer was away from Africa when the fleet arrived and Belisarios was able to make a landing unopposed. Gelimer returned and made a stand at the Battle of Ad Decimum near Carthage (533), but he was decisively defeated and Belisarios was able to enter the city (Map 9.1). Another battle was fought in December, but Belisarios was once again victorious. Early in 534 the Vandal king surrendered. Rumors circulated that Belisarios might set himself up in Africa as an independent ruler, but he returned to Constantinople and a great triumphal celebration was held in which both Belisarios and Gelimer prostrated themselves in front of the emperor. Justinian's African war had been a brilliant success, but the situation in North Africa had been destabilized as a result and the native Berber (or Moorish) population, who had already been in revolt against the Vandals, continued to cause severe difficulties. The Byzantine commanders left in Africa built a powerful system of fortifications, many of which still remain, in an attempt to pacify the Berbers, but this goal was never fully achieved and North Africa was not fully reunited into the Byzantine Empire.

Nonetheless, buoyed by his military successes, Justinian immediately laid plans for the reconquest of Italy. The prospects for victory were favorable, since the Ostrogothic monarchy was in turmoil after the death of Theodoric. Theodahad, Theodoric's nephew and king since 534, had an insecure position. Justinian's main force, only half as large as the army that took Africa, landed at Sicily in 535 under the command of Belisarios and quickly took control of the whole island. Early the next year Belisarios marched north and easily took Naples, an event that led to the overthrow of Theodahad and his replacement by Witigis as king. By December of 536 Belisarios had taken Rome, in part with the

aid of the pope, but the Gothic counterattack pinned the Byzantines in the city for over a year. As the Byzantines moved closer to a direct attack on Ravenna, the Ostrogoths made contact with the Persian king Chosroes II and offered an alliance. Belisarios was eventually able to take Ravenna in 540, but Justinian had become suspicious at the story that his general might declare himself king of Italy, and he recalled Belisarios to Constantinople. In the meantime, after further internal turmoil, Totila became king of the Ostrogoths in 541 and his military ability caused considerable difficulty for the Byzantines.

In 540 the Persians attacked imperial territory and took Antioch, one of the greatest centers of the empire, a severe blow to Byzantine prestige. In 541 Belisarios was sent to the eastern front, where he was able to halt the Persian advance, but he was again recalled, undoubtedly for political reasons. Meanwhile, in 542 the bubonic plague ravaged the empire, striking Constantinople and all the great cities and undoubtedly causing psychological as well as demographic damage.

Justinian thus found himself in the difficult situation of having to fight a war on two fronts against increasingly dangerous enemies, and probably with a lower population and tax base. Totila was slowly able to undo most of the conquests of Belisarios, and the Persians were able to defeat the forces sent against them. In the East the war came to focus more on fighting on the periphery (Armenia and Lazika), and in 545 Justinian was able to conclude a five-year peace with Chosroes, at the cost of paying a relatively minor tribute. In 561 this truce was extended to a period of (supposedly) 50 years and the tribute was reduced. To a certain degree Justinian's policies in the East had been a success.

In the West the war dragged on. Belisarios returned to his command in 544 but at the end of 545 Totila besieged Rome, and at the end of 546 it fell to the Ostrogoths. The city changed hands at least two more times, and the war seemed no closer to a conclusion. Belisarios was again recalled to Constantinople, and, after several plans came and went, Justinian put Narses in command of the imperial forces. Narses was a eunuch of Armenian extraction who had earlier replaced Belisarios in Italy and who had commanded successfully on a number of fronts prior to this time. In 551 Narses set off for Italy with what was then an overwhelming force of 30,000 troops. In the summer of 552 the Ostrogoths were decisively defeated at the Battle of Taginae (Map 9.1), and Totila died of wounds sustained in the battle. Narses pursued the remnants of the Gothic army south and in October another battle was fought near Naples, which essentially ended all opposition to the Byzantine reconquest. Narses remained in Italy, repulsing a

Frankish invasion in 553–4 and securing control of the north. The Byzantines had regained control of Italy, but they accomplished this only after 20 years of war that left the countryside desolate and the Romano-Gothic society of Theodoric in ruins, without replacing it with anything solid. Ravenna remained the capital of Byzantine Italy, and from the end of the sixth century it was governed by an exarch, a military commander who held both military and civilian power since the area was constantly subject to barbarian attack.

It is a measure of Justinian's ambition and his confidence in the ultimate success of his endeavors that, just as Narses was completing the war in Italy, the emperor arranged to make the force of Byzantine arms felt in distant Spain. In 551 he responded to the appeal of a Visigothic noble for support in a revolt against the king. Justinian responded with an expeditionary force, and this managed to gain control of a coastal strip of Spain, which the empire was able to hold until the 620s. We now know that this was the high-water mark of the Byzantine reconquest, but an observer of Justinian's remarkable military success might well have felt that the restoration of the Roman Empire was indeed at hand.

## **Theological Controversy**

The Monophysite controversy continued to simmer throughout the reign of Justinian. Indeed, as we have seen, long before Justinian's time the battle lines had been drawn and both the Monophysites and the Chalcedonians had developed a theology and – probably more important – a hierarchy, administration, and popular support that made compromise all but impossible. As we have seen, in 519 the Akakian Schism was formally ended, and the pope and the patriarch of Constantinople were formally in communion once again. Nonetheless, in Constantinople a formula was put forward by four Scythian monks in an attempt to find a compromise between the Monophysites (who, it will be remembered, had dominated the court for the previous 37 years) and the Chalcedonians. Their solution was to say that “one of the Holy Trinity suffered in the flesh” – meaning that Christ (a member of the Trinity) had suffered and died; this doctrine is called Theopaschitism (meaning that God “suffered”). This teaching was strongly opposed by one of the dominant monastic communities of Constantinople at the time, the so-called Sleepless Monks (the *akoimetoι*). Theirs was a monastery founded in 405 by a certain Alexander, who encouraged his followers to a literal accomplishment of the New Testament injunction to “pray

unceasingly.” Despite the opposition of the Sleepless Monks, Justinian seems officially to have supported Theopaschitism and this is clearly stated in a law of 533. The Monophysites, of course, refused to accept the compromise of Theopaschitism, and Justinian for a time used all the resources of the state to persecute them, especially in Syria. The persecution was aimed almost exclusively at the clergy and the monks, many of whom either fled to Egypt, where imperial religious policy simply could not be enforced, or mingled with the general populace, and the persecution therefore probably had the unintended effect of spreading Monophysite teaching more broadly through all levels of society.

Theodora, it should be remembered, quite openly supported Monophysitism, and from 531 a delegation of Monophysite monks lived under her protection in the Palace of Hosmisdas in the capital. In 532 Justinian organized a conference in Constantinople, to which he invited prominent Chalcedonian and Monophysite leaders, in an attempt to find a solution to the schism. The situation looked promising and in the winter of 534/5 Severus of Antioch came to Constantinople to continue the discussion. The personal intervention of the pope, and Justinian’s desire to maintain good relations with the western church on the eve of the war in Italy, spelled the doom of the negotiations, and the emperor returned to the use of force as a means to support the Chalcedonian position.

Frustrated at his failure to achieve unity in the church, in the 540s Justinian turned again to persuasion. The issue at this time involved the teachings of three earlier theologians: Theodore of Mopsuestia, Theodoret of Cyrrhus, and Ibas of Edessa. These three, generally speaking, represented the theological school of Antioch, but their teachings were accepted by the Council of Chalcedon. Over time, however, they became a bone of contention for the Monophysites, who felt that they and their works should be condemned because they were tainted by Nestorian sentiments. Justinian thus felt that such a condemnation of the “Three Chapters” might be a way to heal the rift with the Monophysites, and he himself wrote a detailed theological treatise to this effect, issuing it as an imperial edict in 543/5. This edict was controversial in the West, and the papacy wavered as to whether to accept it, but the condemnation of the Three Chapters was officially proclaimed at the Second Council of Constantinople in 553. The hopes of the emperor were unfulfilled, since the Monophysites were not impressed and the rift between them and the Chalcedonians remained as wide as ever. Even an emperor as powerful as Justinian could not legislate religious belief for his subjects.



One of the reasons the Monophysites were not moved by these attempts to find a solution is that they were growing in numbers and organization. Much of this was due to a tireless group of Monophysite bishops, foremost among whom was Jacob Bardaeus (whose name means “Jacob in ragged clothes” in Syriac). Jacob was a Syrian monk who went to Constantinople about the time of Justinian’s accession, and who apparently found a place in the empress Theodora’s circle of Monophysite leaders in the capital. Presumably as a counter to the effectiveness of Justinian’s persecution of the Monophysites in Syria, Theodora sought the consecration of Jacob as bishop of Edessa and Theodore in Bostra. Jacob was not able to take up residence in Edessa, but he roamed the East as a missionary for his faith and appointed Monophysite bishops in all the major cities, including many in western Asia Minor. Many of these new bishops were monks from Syria, and from this time onward the Monophysite movement had a definitely Syriac character (except for Egypt, where it was Coptic in nature). Justinian made many attempts to arrest Jacob Bardaeus, but he never succeeded.

## Continued Legal Activity

Justinian’s activity in the realm of law continued after the brief interruption of the Nika Revolt. The legislative committee, disbanded during the difficulties, was reconstituted and it turned its attention, first, to the *Institutes*, published in November of 533, and then to the *Digest*, published in December. The *Institutes* was designed essentially as a textbook to be used in the teaching of law, especially in the schools of Constantinople and Beirut. The *Digest* represents an even more remarkable achievement, especially given the often contradictory nature of earlier Roman legislation. As a practical handbook, designed to be used by real judges, it quoted and discussed the writings of the classical Roman jurists, cited contemporary legislation, and developed principles on which conflicting legal principles might be reconciled.

The original edition of the *Codex Justinianus* (issued in 529) was made obsolete by these newer works and the continued legislation of the emperor, and it was replaced by an updated version, published on November 16, 534. This detailed legal code, organized in 12 books, formed the basis of law for the rest of the Byzantine era, and it was borrowed and modified in all the areas influenced by Byzantine civilization and even in much of the West. Naturally, Justinian continued to issue laws through the rest of his reign; these were called *Novellae* (New Laws) and, unlike most of the rest of his legislation, they were issued more

commonly in Greek than in Latin. Together, these four summaries of Roman (Byzantine) law, the *Institutes*, the *Digest*, the *Codex Justinianus*, and the *Novellae*, represent one of the high points of worldwide legal activity and they came to be known as the *Corpus Juris Civilis*.

## Later Years

In 541/2 the bubonic plague struck Constantinople and spread quickly throughout the empire. Justinian himself fell ill, but recovered. Many of his compatriots did not, and some scholars have argued that as much as one-third of the population of Constantinople perished. The cities were affected more than the countryside, and the young presumably more than the old. Just as seriously, the disease reoccurred roughly every 15 years into the seventh century, leaving no generation untouched by its icy hand and the accompanying fear of an early and unpredictable death. This phenomenon, along with the drawn-out Italian war, was a sign of trouble to come.

Theodora died on June 28, 548. It is impossible to be certain about the impact she had on the age and the reign of Justinian. Certainly, Prokopios depicts her as a remarkably strong personality and even the superior of the emperor in underhanded dealing. She founded many monasteries, churches, and other religious institutions: one of the most famous was the Metanoia (Repentance) monastery, which enrolled reformed prostitutes. Her protection of Monophysite leaders in Constantinople, within the walls of the Palace of Hormisdas, seems beyond doubt, and this certainly indicates a woman of strong character and belief.

### Box 6.3 *Justinian's Plague*

In 541/2 ships from Egypt arrived in the ports of Constantinople, bringing the regular shipments of grain. In this case, however, they also seem to have brought with them a plague of ferocity and destructive capability that has seldom been seen in human history. The plague raced through the population of the city and the number of deaths was phenomenal: according to the historian Prokopios, 10,000 people died each day and the provisions for burying them could not keep up so that bodies lay stacked up in many parts of the city. The disease struck the emperor himself, but he recovered, and Prokopios was apparently also struck by the disease and he left a detailed account of the effects of the plague, following closely the literary precedent set by Thucydides in describing the plague of his own time. The plague spread throughout the empire, killing many officials and other leaders and apparently leading to a real economic crisis for the state, since tax revenues declined greatly. This, of course, came at a crucial time in Justinian's wars in Italy and it may have contributed to the long-drawn-out course of the conflict. In addition, one imagines that

there were severe psychological as well as long-term population problems, especially if estimates that as many as 30 percent of the population of the empire died.

Through the rest of the reign of Justinian the ravages of the disease slowly subsided, but the plague returned periodically, every generation, for at least the next century, certainly playing an important role in the crises of that age.

### ***FURTHER READING***

L. K. Little, ed., *Plague and the End of Antiquity: The Pandemic of 541–750*. Cambridge, 2006.

W. Rosen, *Justinian's Flea: Plague, Empire, and the Birth of Europe*. Viking, 2007.

After the plague, and Theodora's death a few years later, Justinian's remarkable energy and optimism seem to have waned. They must have been further diluted by the course of the Italian war, even though that ended, eventually, in a Byzantine victory. Furthermore, as we have seen, the emperor's attempts at religious unity were clearly a failure, and it must have puzzled him to see the Monophysites not only defying imperial orders but also growing in strength as the years passed.

In 558 the dome of Hagia Sophia collapsed, and in 559 the Kutrigur Huns crossed the Danube and pressed as far south as Thermopylae in Greece. When the Huns threatened Constantinople, Justinian again called Belisarios out of retirement and he soundly defeated them. The emperor strengthened the Danube fleet and the Huns withdrew, but this invasion was to be a portent of things to come over the next half-century.

## **Box 6.4 *Transvestite Nuns***

The Byzantine tradition was very strong in terms of distinguishing the roles of men and women. Like most pre-modern societies, Byzantium assumed that men would be the bread-winners, the soldiers, the emperors, while women were thought to have a secondary role in the home. As we have already seen in this book, there were remarkable exceptions of powerful women, but the norm was generally very different and this was especially true in religion, where the church was dominated completely by men. Among ascetics, indeed, spiritual virtue was defined in masculine terms and it was common to view women as temptresses who would, by their very nature, tend to draw monks away from a life of holiness.

It may be somewhat surprising to note, therefore, that there was a strong tradition in Byzantium to honor a small number of women whom we may call "transvestite nuns." These women were admired because their desire for a holy life was so strong that they overcame the opposition of family members or the general monastic community and, disguising themselves as men, entered monasteries and lived lives of particular sanctity. We have no idea how common such a phenomenon was, obviously, but the lives of several of these women are filled with enough particular detail that there is no reason to doubt their general veracity.

One such woman was St. Matrona of Perge (in Asia Minor). She apparently lived in the second

half of the fifth and the very early part of the sixth century and she offered notable resistance to the Monophysite policy of the emperor Anastasios I. She grew up in ordinary circumstances, was married, and had a daughter. When she was 25 years old, however, she went to Constantinople and decided to adopt the ascetic life. She put her daughter in the care of a widow and sought to become a nun. She was afraid that her husband would find her in one of the well-known women's monasteries of the city and, while considering this, she had a dream that she was fleeing from her husband and was rescued by some monks. From this she decided that she was destined to enter a male monastery. Thus, she cut off her hair, dressed as a eunuch, and took the male name of Babylas. All that accomplished, she entered the monastery of Bassianos in Constantinople.

According to her biographer, Matrona/Babylas astounded the monks with her feats of asceticism, engaging in strenuous fasts and depriving herself of sleep even more than they did. At one point she was almost discovered when one of the monks (who had recently entered the monastery after a dissolute life as an actor) suspected something and asked why her ears were pierced, something unusual for a man in that age. She came up with a clever answer, saying that she had been a slave and her mistress had dressed her up like a girl and made her wear earrings. The abbot of the monastery, however, learned the truth from a dream; after much consideration he decided that Matrona could not remain in the monastery and he arranged for her to be sent to a female monastery at the city of Emesa in Syria. While she was there she performed the first of her miracles and somehow word got out that she had lived disguised as a man in a monastery, causing people to begin to regard her as a holy person. These events came to the attention of Matrona's husband, who pursued her relentlessly, though the saint was always one step ahead of him, keeping on the move and seeking always to conceal her location. In order to escape detection she spent time in a pagan temple near Beirut, where she was beset by demons and even the Devil himself, who sought to turn the pagans of the city against her. Matrona, however, always prevailed and a number of pagan young women were converted to Christianity and joined her nascent monastery in the pagan temple.

Fear of discovery by her husband and a longing to see the abbot Bassianos led Matrona to return to Constantinople. Bassianos received her and her companions and, inspired by God, he advised them to establish a monastery in Constantinople, apparently for women who would live together in male monastic garb. The monastery founded by Matrona grew and flourished, attracting strong-minded women, some of whom, like the abbess, had to flee from their husbands. At the same time, Matrona attracted the attention of many of the aristocrats of Constantinople, including members of the imperial family, who joined in wondering at her sanctity and the way in which her asceticism was as difficult as that of the monks themselves. One of these nuns was especially wealthy; she enabled the monastery to grow and prosper and for Matrona to provide for the construction of several churches. She lived in her monastery the rest of her life, dying apparently at the age of about 100.

Matrona's desire for a male version of the ascetic life was not unique. There had been others before her and there were others later on. A certain Mary, who apparently lived a century later than Matrona, entered a monastery with her father, who disguised his daughter by cutting off her hair and giving her the name of Marinos. She remained in the monastery, undetected, after her father's death, but the greatest challenge to her position occurred when she was accused of fathering a child. Though she could easily have demonstrated her innocence, she instead chose to maintain her disguise and suffered all the punishments and humiliations this brought along with it. Thus, oddly enough, Mary/Marinos demonstrated her "manly" spirituality by accepting punishment for a crime of a man's sin. Her life was broadly known through the Middle Ages; versions of it were popular in the Latin West, and Arabic, Ethiopian, and Armenian translations were also made.

The phenomenon of the transvestite nuns is an interesting one and it can be approached from a

psychological or sociological as well as a religious perspective. It adds a fascinating dimension to our understanding of Byzantine life.

### ***FURTHER READING***

Alice-Mary Talbot, ed., *Holy Women of Byzantium: Ten Saints' Lives in English Translation*. Washington DC, 1996.

## **Prokopios, the *Secret History*, and an Evaluation of the Reign of Justinian**

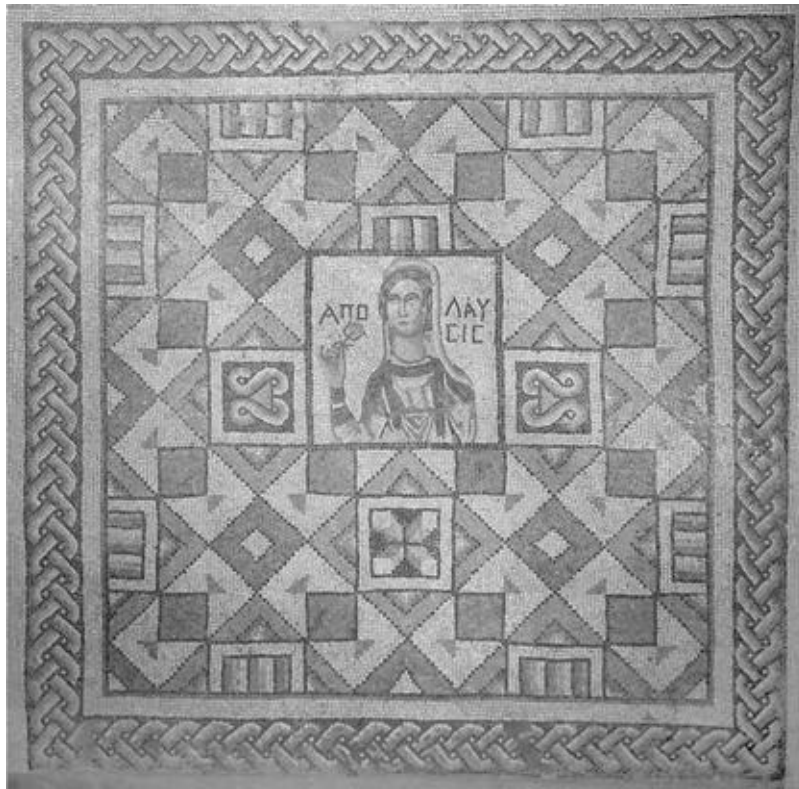
As mentioned at the outset, it is difficult to know how to evaluate the reign of Justinian: on the one hand, this period can be seen as the great flowering of the culture and political power of early Byzantine civilization; on the other it can be viewed as an age of tyranny and fiscal excess that sowed the seeds for collapse in the decades to come. Probably these are just two sides of the same issue. The age of Justinian was, in many ways, the fulfillment of the religious, political, and cultural trends that had begun in the age of Constantine, 200 years earlier. The emperor was supremely confident in his relationship to God and in his God-given right to rule the world. Many of his predecessors had felt the same way, but Justinian had the talent and the (hyperactive?) personality to attempt to put the political theories of Byzantium into effect. He was undoubtedly intelligent and single-minded in his desire to defeat his enemies and accomplish his goals. In some of these accomplishments he was brilliantly successful, at least in the short run, and the degree of cultural activity in his time is remarkable by any standard.

The emperor, as we have seen, was the son of a peasant and the nephew of his (possibly illiterate) predecessor. Yet he clearly understood the complex theological and philosophical questions of his day, and he took an active role in them, not only as a law-giver and persecutor, but also as the author of theological treatises. The churches and other buildings constructed under his reign, and to a large degree at his command, are clear testimony of the level of cultural activity. Art in general, poetry, law, and historical studies obviously flourished, and the emperor took a direct interest in such matters. The art of the period is of the highest quality, and it is marked by a conscious blending of the classicizing tradition with the more linear, non-realistic style that had emerged alongside it. In some art forms, such as ivory carving, a realistic, classicizing tradition dominated, but in others, such as painting and sculpture, the figures are less

realistic and emphasize more the traditions that had developed in the third and fourth centuries. Overall, however, we can see the art and architecture of the period as a blending of the traditions that had existed, side by side, from the third century onward.

Among the leading poets of the age was Romanos the Melodist (d. after 555). He was a Syrian (perhaps of Jewish background) who came to Constantinople in the reign of Anastasios I and wrote ecclesiastical hymns in great numbers – some 1,000 according to Byzantine tradition. He was only the most famous of many poets who wrote hymns as *kontakia*, complex verse sermons in a meter that used stressed rather than ancient accents, normally telling Biblical stories or celebrating individual church feasts. His poetry is dramatic and psychological in manner, involving the worshiper in the emotions that might have been experienced by Biblical figures. Over 80 of Romanos' poems survive, but, unlike some of his less famous colleagues, his works were not incorporated in the liturgy. Only the "Akathistos Hymn," arguably the most famous of all Byzantine hymns, found its way into the Byzantine liturgy – and it is not at all certain that this was a composition by Romanos. The literary evidence, however, suggests that this magnificent poem was written in the sixth century (even though the manuscript tradition assigns it to the seventh or eighth century). This poem, which is still used in the Orthodox liturgy for the Annunciation (March 25) and throughout Lent, consists of 24 stanzas, each beginning with a successive letter of the Greek alphabet. The first 12 are salutations to the Virgin that retell the Biblical story of the Incarnation; the second 12 are meditations on the mysteries of that event. The whole creates a wonderfully subtle set of interrelated images that conveys much of the spirituality of the Byzantine world.

**Figure 6.6** Mosaic pavement with a representation of "Apolausis." This pavement from northern Syria came from the formal dining room of a wealthy house of about the sixth century. It depicts the personification of "Relaxation and Ease" (*apolausis*), shown in the form of a woman. The mosaic shows the willingness of the Christian elite of the empire to cling to the trappings and symbols of the classical past, as well as the characteristic affinity for richly patterned surfaces reminiscent of oriental carpets. Photo © Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, Image Collections & Fieldwork Archives, Washington DC.



Aside from Prokopios and Tribonian, both mentioned earlier, many other scholars worked during the reign of Justinian and were influenced by his policies. One of the more important of these was John Lydos (meaning he was from Lydia, in Asia Minor). He was a scholar, well versed in Latin as well as Greek, who came to Constantinople in 511 and secured a post in the civil administration. He was successful in this quest and served for 40 years in the bureaucracy, where he earned the respect of Justinian himself. John wrote a number of important works that indicate his knowledge of the Latin history of the Roman Empire and his belief that the Byzantine Empire of his own day was a continuation of that great tradition. His book *On the Magistracies* is a history of late Roman bureaucracy and it provides many insights on the society and politics of his own day, even suggesting that John may well have had republican (i.e., anti-imperial) sentiments. He also wrote other treatises, one *On the Months*, a study of calendars and time-reckoning, and another *On Omens*, concerning astrology.

Although art and literature undoubtedly thrived in this period and the emperor clearly took a strong interest in them, there were also negative aspects to Justinian's leadership. He was clearly stubborn, intolerant, and willing to use force to get his way. The persecution of pagans, Manichaeans, Samaritans, and even Monophysites was especially characteristic of his policy, and the closing of

the Academy in Athens (if indeed it took place) is often seen as the most negative manifestation of Justinian's intolerance.

Naturally, a crucial aspect of any evaluation of the reign of Justinian is the political and military collapse that took place in the empire almost immediately after his death. We will discuss those events in the pages that follow, but in general terms we have to ask whether we should blame these problems on the expensive, grandiose, and possibly mistaken policies of Justinian or whether we should find their causes in the actions of his successors.

Certainly our own ambivalence about the reign of Justinian also comes from the works of Prokopios, our predominant authority for this period, and through whose works we (by necessity) view the emperor. Prokopios of Caesarea was a contemporary of Justinian and, as secretary to Belisarios, he had first-hand information about many of the events (particularly the military campaigns) that he describes. The historian's three main works present three almost completely different views of the emperor and his age. The *Wars* is an epic depiction of the wars of the period, written in a highly classicizing style that consciously imitates the ancient historian Thucydides. In this work the emperor does not figure highly, as the main characters are the soldiers and generals engaged in Justinian's attempt at reconquest. The *Buildings* clearly is a work of flattery, written to praise the emperor as a great builder, whose wisdom and close connection to God assure his every success and allow him to surpass all his predecessors. The *Secret History*, on the other hand, is a work of calumny, full of personal attacks on the emperor but even more on Theodora and her friend Antonia, the wife of Belisarios. Much of the book is scandalous and humorous to the modern reader, and the decidedly pornographic depictions of Theodora – notably before she became empress – have won the book both praise and condemnation. Certainly, the *Secret History* is not a balanced account (any more than the *Buildings* is), and many of the details can hardly be accepted as historical truth, interesting as they are. Thus, at one point in the work, Prokopios described the imperial couple in the following words:

Wherefore to me, and many others of us, these two [Justinian and Theodora] seemed not to be human beings, but veritable demons, and what the poets call vampires: who laid their heads together to see how they could most easily and quickly destroy the race and deeds of men; and assuming human bodies, became man-demons, and so convulsed the world. And one could find evidence of this in many things, but especially in the superhuman power with which they worked their will... And some of those who have been with



Justinian at the palace late at night, men who were pure of spirit, have thought they saw a strange demoniac form taking his place. One man said that the Emperor suddenly rose from his throne and walked about, and indeed he was never wont to remain sitting for long, and immediately Justinian's head vanished, while the rest of his body seemed to ebb and flow; whereat the beholder stood aghast and fearful, wondering if his eyes were deceiving him. But presently he perceived the vanished head filling out and joining the body again as strangely as it had left it.

Neither of Prokopios' depictions of Justinian is fully acceptable, and the author was undoubtedly moved by the necessities of the different genres in which he wrote these books: the *Buildings* is a work of encomium (flattering praise) and the *Secret History* is one of invective (scathing attack). At the same time, there is reason to think that Prokopios had real complaints against Justinian and Theodora, mainly concerning the way in which these relative newcomers ran roughshod over the privileges and sensitivities of the contemporary aristocracy, of which Prokopios apparently felt himself a part. Thus, one can imagine that the undisguised authoritarianism of Justinian's reign upset Prokopios and his social circle, people who still maintained a vestige of republican ideas and who demanded, at the very least, to be treated with respect by the emperor and his entourage. Justinian, of course, would not have any of that. He was a believer in Eusebios of Caesarea's ideal of the God-protected emperor and, just as there was only one God, there could be only one emperor, whose rule was absolute. Justinian obviously controlled the state and imposed his will, but Prokopios was able, to a certain extent, to have the last word, since the *Secret History* presents what is no doubt the best-known characterization of the emperor and the empress.

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*Corpus Juris Civilis* (The Body of Civil Law), term used to identify the codification of Roman law under Justinian, between 529 and 534. This was made up of the *Codex Justinianus* (Justinianic Code, a compilation of laws from Hadrian onward), the *Digest*, the *Institutes*, and the *Novellae* (New Laws). For historical purposes the code is perhaps most useful since it supplements and brings up to date the *Codex Theodosianus* (see chapter 5). Rather surprisingly, the only published English translation of the *Corpus* is S. P. Scott, *The Civil Law*. Cincinnati, OH, 1932; repr. New York, 1973. This, along with F. H. Blume's annotated translation of the *Codex* and the *Novellae*, is available at <http://uwacadweb.uwyo.edu/blume&Justinian/>

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